

FOOD

People Who Feel Socially Inferior Eat More and Prefer Unhealthy Food

A new study finds that simply feeling poor leads people to eat more junk food.

By [Reynard Loki](#) / [AlterNet](#)

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Many poor communities are called "food deserts" because they offer no access to healthy foods like fresh, organic fruits and vegetables. Faced with this dilemma, residents in these areas are often compelled to turn to unhealthy, processed foods. But it's not just a lack of healthy food options that impacts the health of poor people: stress also triggers bad dietary choices, as stress hormones have the power not only to [increase appetite](#), but also cravings for foods that are high in fat and sugar.



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Now a new study conducted by scientists from the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Chinese University of Hong Kong and published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science suggests that people who merely feel that they are socially inferior—whether or not they actually are—prefer unhealthy food and eat more.

Scientists believe that having a low social status compared to one's peers is linked to overeating and the accumulation of fat, a strategy that may help alleviate the stress generated by that being of a low social rank. But those same individuals also have less access to healthy foods, so they overeat unhealthy foods. A 2001 study funded by the Swiss government, for example, found that "subjects from lower education and/or occupation consumed less fish and vegetables but [more fried foods](#), pasta and potatoes, table sugar and beer." The

researchers also found that lower socioeconomic groups overall had a lower intake of iron, calcium, vitamin A and vitamin D.



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But the Chinese study suggest that overeating bad food could be triggered by one's own self-perception of their social standing, and not the socioeconomic reality.

"As a social psychologist, questions of how people navigate status hierarchies and made sense of their own social standing were always of interest to me," said Bobby Cheon, an assistant professor at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University. "In this study, we questioned whether the relationship between low socioeconomic status and obesity required an actual deficit in social and economic resources, or whether the mere perception or feeling of a deficiency was sufficient."

In order to make the participants of their study feel socially inferior to their peers, Cheon and study co-author Hong Ying-yi from the Chinese University of Hong Kong asked test subjects to compare themselves to one of two groups on a ladder that represented society—either people at the top of the ladder or people at the bottom. Then the subjects were asked to envision their interactions with someone from that group.

"The idea is that most people are going to feel relatively lacking or deprived of these resources that represent status when comparing themselves with the top rung of the ladder, which produces a feeling of being low in social class or rank," said Cheon. "This manipulation doesn't seem to produce the feelings of stress and insecurity that is associated with actual low socioeconomic status or poverty. Yet this makes the manipulation even more appropriate since we are seeking to demonstrate that increased appetite associated with feelings of low socioeconomic status is not simply a result of eating in response to stress."

Test subjects who felt socially inferior were more likely to associate pleasant words to unhealthy foods like fried chicken and pizza. The researchers concluded that simply feeling socially inferior caused participants to subconsciously prefer

foods that are high in calories and fat. Their conclusion was supported by the fact that the low socioeconomic status group, when offered snacks after the experiment, consumed 65 percent more calories than the high socioeconomic status group, indicating that simply feeling socially inferior doesn't just alter one's perception of food, but can actually make one eat more of it.



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"One snacking or meal session in a laboratory may not be especially meaningful. But, for people who chronically feel low subjective socioeconomic status, this may translate to a modest but persistent increase in caloric intake that may gradually [develop into obesity](#) over an extended period of time," Cheon told

Asian Scientist Magazine. "Our research suggests that, independent of actual financial deprivation or stress associated with poverty and low socioeconomic status, simply feeling poor is a potential risk factor for excess caloric intake," Cheon added. "Interventions targeting obesity among people of lower socioeconomic means may need to address these psychological factors in addition to facilitating access to healthier diets."

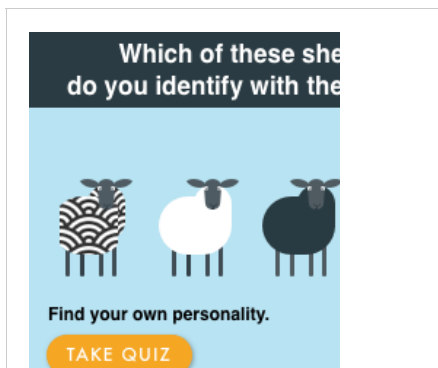
The new study builds on a growing body of evidence that suggests living in poverty produces stress on a level higher than previously thought. In 2015, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a worrisome [report](#) that found a striking disparity in stress levels among people in different income brackets. The report, which analyzed data collected between 2009 and 2013, found that "serious psychological distress" was experienced by 8.7 percent of people below the federal poverty line, which equates to an annual income of \$11,770 for an individual and \$24,250 for a family of four, compared to just 1.2 percent of individuals at or above 400 percent of the poverty line.

While the CDC report didn't contemplate the impact of stress on diet or nutrition, the researchers found that adults with serious psychological distress were more likely to have life-threatening health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, which are linked to poor diets. Tellingly, the CDC also found that adults with serious psychological distress were up to 10 times more likely to have limitations on basic activities for daily living, which included eating.

There are several interconnected factors at play: poverty, stress and diet. The Chinese study is compelling as it introduces a new psychological layer for scientists to investigate. If merely feeling socially inferior produces negative

changes in one's diet, then people who suffer from an inferiority complex—a feeling of inadequacy that may stem from real or imaginary sources—may overeat bad foods, even if they aren't actually socioeconomically inferior to their peers. A vicious cycle could emerge, as anxiety and depression—common symptoms of an inferiority complex—are also linked to poor diets and "emotional eating," or turning to food for comfort.

"This cycle can continue throughout an individual's entire life, making it [impossible to function healthily](#) within society," writes Tamara Warta on Lifescript.com.

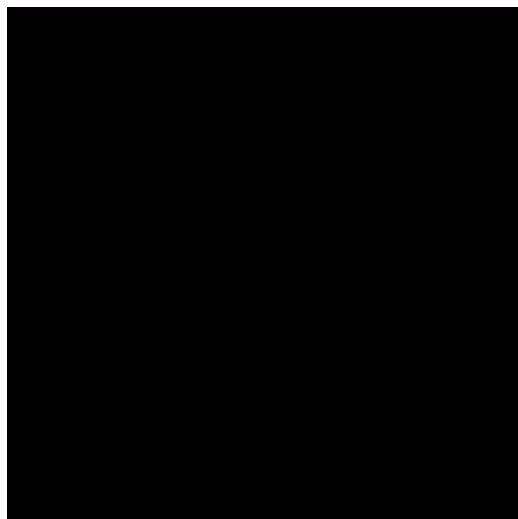


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More research needs to be done on this subject; Cheon plans to investigate how feeling socially inferior can impact the way the body regulates hormones related to appetite. But for now, it appears that simply feeling like you're on a lower rung on the ladder, whether or not you really are, could lead to overeating junk foods—and suffering

the health problems that come with a poor diet.

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